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THE CHILD OF TO-DAY.

BY GRACE GWYNNE.

(Continued from page 20.)

LITERATURE in any form in education, whether 'tis Magnal's *Questions*, or Ruskin, *The Pseudonym Library*, or Kingsley's *Sermons*, each book we read, leaves a wave-mark on the shores of the mind, and helps to form our opinions and aspirations in practical life. And what then, we may ask, is the influence on our children's minds of the flood of books which now reach even our nurseries? So exquisitely illustrated and printed as to be the admiration of the elders, and yet so cheap as to be within reach of all, these lovely toy-books come pouring in at Christmas and on birthdays; a boxful of small volumes as a gift for one child off the tree, a book of cut-out pictures that will stand alone for the baby, who cannot yet speak, yet is the possessor of a large drawerful of literature, and bound magazines for the elder children. They get stacked up, with many duplicates, are torn before read, some are given to hospitals, but of the legion on that crammed nursery-shelf only two or three become favourites, read and re-read by the little ones. A little later in life come in the familiar series of A.L.O.E., Miss Yonge's adolescent novels, Ballantyne's, Jules Verne's, and Mrs. Ewing's delightful tales, to fill the children's own particular cupboard shelves. I firmly believe children have too many story-books in these days, and that if they were allowed only a few, and those of the best, they would read them with truer enjoyment, and not acquire so early in life that love of reading only for the "story" and skipping the graver portions, which produces later on the typical novel-reader with her insatiable thirst for fiction.

In old times a child had very few books, but read them over and over again, lived amongst the characters till they seemed like real friends, adopted their names, shared their enthusiasms, and dramatised their adventures. But now a book is only a book, there is no illusion, it is read merely *pour passer le temps*, and when "Finis" is reached the child only says, "What shall I read next?" Those old books, from which we derived so much enjoyment long long ago, were

as unlike the children's literature of to-day, as the children who read them were unlike our own; and when we glance through their yellow pages again, and once more meet the stiff forms of the *Fairchild Family* or *Leila on the Island* and *Sandford and Merton*, and, best of all, renew our acquaintance with the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*, we cannot help wondering at the simplicity with which, when children, we swallowed all those gloomy sermons and prayers, in which each tale, even each incident, was wrapped up! Certainly the rising generation with their Ewing and Caldecott ought surely to be different to children brought up on Mrs. Sherwood and Struwpeter's woodcuts. The "story-book child," that vision of pedantic virtue, the inspiration of Leigh Hunt or Miss Sewell, has disappeared as completely as the ichthyosaurus; its fossil remains are found only in the drawing-room ballad, where destitute innocence dies in the third verse to an agitated accompaniment in the relative minor key!

The child of nature, the emancipated child, is the hobby of our age, the ideal of our books. It is a healthy ideal if not carried too far, emancipated, not from wholesome discipline, but from that repression of affection and animal spirits considered necessary long ago. Children live in an atmosphere of love and appreciation to-day, and, being treated as rational and sympathetic companions, have become so to their elders. In some cases it may be carried to extremes, and by lax discipline and over-indulgence produce that obnoxious being, the bane of society, a cool, precocious, and pert child. But the average results are good. In some families you may see the fruit of both systems side by side. The undemonstrative, rebellious, elder ones who were brought up in the early days of rigour and inexperience and inherited theories of the mother, and the tractable affectionate younger ones who came in for softer days.

In our generation the system pursued both by philanthropy and education is based upon the development of good in the human being, it is no longer merely a crusade against evil. We do not, like Mr. Fairchild, take our children to see the skeleton of a fratricide hanging on a gallows in a dark wood, in order to impress their minds with the horrors of quarrelling. In that book Miss Augusta was, I always felt,

deliberately burned to death merely as an object lesson against over-indulgence. In *Struwpeter* we have the same Draconian code levelled against childish errors, and adorned with nightmare woodcuts steeped in aniline dyes. Tommy, the truant from church, who was shewn the error of his way by a sabbatarian but hungry lion, and the tale of the murderer who bit off his mother's ear as a gentle hint of her omissions in his education, were held up to us as edifying scarecrows. But more morbid still were the incentives to virtue in our "Sunday books," especially the good children who always died at the end; Frank in *Holiday House*, Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Dairyman's Daughter*, and *The Little Pilgrim on her way to the Holy Hill*, they all died of a plethora of goodness!

I used to wonder in those childish days how it was that the virtuous deeds of those children seemed always to be "found out" and recorded, as St. Clair watched, himself unseen, Eva teaching Topsy to pray, or how the most sacred feelings of Ellen in the *Wide Wide World* found their way into print! How different it all seemed when practised in real life! If we tried to copy them and bestowed our last penny on a beggar, or gave up our own way to a sister with heroic self-denial, or practised any other small virtue, alas! the glow of self-approbation soon died away, and we felt unconsciously damped because nobody had remarked it! we were playing to an empty house, and found that virtue planted in *imitation* is but a flower without a root! These very religious tales, I believe, fostered an unhealthy kind of introspection in the more imaginative of their little readers, and to some degree robbed them of that sweet unconsciousness which is the greatest charm of childhood. Miss Edgeworth headed a rebellion against the "goody goody" book, and boldly left out the long polemical discourses, the prayers and hymns, the immaculate and stilted parent, and the little girl who dies of an access of goodness. She has been followed and surpassed by many charming writers, to whom we can give no higher praise than that their studies of child character and graceful writing are worthy of their illustrators, Caldecott and Gordon Browne, the *tout ensemble* such perfection as can only be appreciated by the elders. These writers have a healthy influence, they point their moral with homely wit and

practical common sense easily understood by the children. The story of *Gertie and May* fighting about who should "give up" is so delightfully true to nature, it has often turned a quarrel in my nursery into a joke with a charmingly personal application. And for very young readers, *Susy and her Six Teachers*, that dear old friend of my infancy, has never been excelled, and I trust will never be out of print, that "Mrs. Love" and "Aunt Patience," "Mr. Ought," "Miss Joy," "Mr. Pain," and "the Angel Faith" may help to bring up my grandchildren with its sweet and wholesome allegory.

There are many charming sketches of juvenile wit, beauty, and innocence, which are often mistakenly put into the hands of children, and should be left to their elders. Such are *Helen's Babies*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *Misunderstood* and *Timothy's Quest*. These are written from the point of view of a grown-up person, and a child quite misses the perspective of the narrator, and apprehends merely the facts. Give them with confidence any book to which the name of Mrs. Ewing, Ballantyne, Stevenson, or Mrs. Molesworth is attached, these are trumpet-calls to the true heroism of loyalty, truth, and unselfishness. What could teach a sweeter or more pathetic lesson than the story of *Madam Liberality*, the generous and ingenious child whose whole heart was so set upon giving pleasure to others, that she voluntarily went to the dentist's and had a tooth drawn for the sake of the sixpence given her on such occasions, that she might spend it on Christmas surprises for her brothers and sisters! *The Story of a Short Life*, *Jackanapes*, or *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances*, to which of these shall we give the palm for the art that reaches the very depths of the heart? Mrs. Ewing is the queen of writers for children, but Mrs. Molesworth is a very great favourite also. In her simple tales we recognise portraits taken from life with truly happy fidelity, and even in her slighter tales are found some sketches of childish heroism and loving unselfishness, and character-drawing that shows as great insight into the child-heart as even she possessed who penned *Madam Liberality*.

The best story-books for children must be those which insensibly guide them into the enjoyment of books which are *not* story-books, which lure them into reading works on science, travel, poetry, and even deeper subjects. Amongst such we might mention that old book—*Eyes and No-eyes*,

Kingsley's *Water-babies*, the lives of great men and women, and Gatty's *Parables from Nature*. Indirectly Mrs. Ewing's books all have this tendency. In *Six to Sixteen* and *Mary's Meadow* we have a glimpse into her own early training in the love of nature. The child of learned and scientific parents, she was from infancy ambitious to make their pleasures her pleasures, and succeeded in finding undreamed-of romance and charm in the dusty old folios of her father's library. So, dubbing herself *The Traveller's Joy*, she goes forth to plant and sow sweet flowers by field path and hedge and dusty road, to cheer the wayfarers as they pass, in imitation of Alphonse Karr! What a poetic and lovely ambition for a child!

It is not always easy to find children's books in which science and art are made so attractive as to win more than a passing interest, but much may be done in this way by simple conversation on such subjects, especially during their walks. Children love to be talked to sensibly, and we often forget how little of the ordinary panorama of life they understand, and how easily we may give them information about common facts, that will appear to them, and justly, as wonderful as miracles or fairy-tales; and their questions often in return teach *us* a great deal. To some people indeed it is a puzzle how to talk to a child so as to evoke any response better than a gruffly shy "yes" or "no." "What pretty hair! will you give me one of these curls?" or the opening clause of the Catechism, appear with such the accepted formula to loose the tied tongue of the child "sent for to the drawing-room." But to some few happy women it is given to find their way with ease to a child's confidence, and without apparent effort to glide into mutually interested and instructive conversation. Many children appreciate this so much that they will ask for the company of a favourite grown-up friend for a treat, even before they think of their child friends.

Ask a child how it thinks coal is made, or where salt comes from, and you will probably be as amused by their mild suggestions, as was Miss Ophelia when she had examined Topsy as to her origin, and elicited the reply that she "S'pose she growed." Of course after you have enlightened them as to these subjects, you may expect to find Tommy in a clean suit grubbing for good specimens of palm trees in the coal box, or giving false alarms about the

subsidence of his neighbour's buildings as indicative of the discovery of an entirely new salt district!

A propos of "Dinneford's Magnesia," I once told my little girl about the Harrogate springs where sulphur, magnesia, iron, and other chemical waters appear in different wells in one field. So thoroughly did she take in this curious phenomenon, that one day soon after, when driving on the moors, catching sight of a golden-brown spring amongst the heather, she excitedly exclaimed, "Look, look, mummy, there's a *gravy-well*!" The half-digested facts are thus often amusingly confused. I have heard them speak of the cow in the meadow "that has lost some of her red paint," of the bird's "foliage" and the dog's "feathers," and I suppose every child in the world has once come to ask his mother in sudden panic, "Will the orange-pip he has swallowed grow up into a tree inside him?" But after learning more of creation's wonders and what invention can do, after hearing of the giant that Stevenson found concealed in the nursery tea-kettle, of the apple that taught Newton the secret of gravitation, of the lightning so swiftly carrying the world's messages and bridging distance and even death to bring us the voices of our friends; or when you enable the child to watch the sleeping chrysalis change into a lovely denizen of air, or the blue thrush egg become a being of life and wing and song; when they watch with you the phenomenon of the sun's eclipse, or count the colours of nature's palette in the rainbow, turn over with you the stone pages of geology and handle "fishes that swam in the flood"; when they study the geometrical regularity of the bees' cell, or go to Dallinger's famous ant, to "consider her ways and be wise," what wonder if after learning of these marvels around them, nothing seems beyond belief, nothing too wonderful to be true, and that they accept with equal readiness the tales of that wonderland of which Hans Andersen and the brothers Grimm sing to them in the gloaming, for

"The innocent child, with eyes undimmed,
As the sky in its blueness over him,
Has only to touch that portal rim,
And it opens wide before him."

What wonder if they listen with sweet and ready faith to the wonders of religion, and that "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings is perfected praise."